

GAP IN THE STUDENTS' AND TRAVEL AGENCIES' OPINION ON THE NECESSARY KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO WORK IN TRAVEL AGENCIES

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Abstract: Travel agencies are important stakeholders in the development of tourism in the destination. They create integrated tourism products with high value added. Therefore, in addition to formal knowledge, they expect specific skills from their employees. However, the study programmes of educational institutions in the field of tourism often focus more on specific knowledge and skills in the hotel industry, at the same time neglecting the business of travel agencies. In addition, it is necessary to consider whether the existing formal education provide knowledge and develop skills that are crucial for the business of travel agencies. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate if there is a gap in the opinions of students (future employees) and travel agencies on the knowledge and skills necessary for working in travel agencies. For this purpose, research was conducted on students of the University of Split, University Department of Professional Studies and the travel agencies in Croatia measuring the probable difference in their opinions. The results indicated that the opinions of both groups of respondents were agreed to the most important knowledge and skills for work (sales skills, foreign languages and digital business). The considerable significance of international work or educational experience was also confirmed by both groups of respondents. Still, there is a difference relating to recommendations that employers give more emphasis than the future employees who haven't yet recognized their importance. Consequently, it is necessary to encourage continuous cooperation between the educational institution and the employers in order to obtain detailed information about the necessary knowledge and skills in the field of travel agency business, and on the other hand, to stimulate students to make more effort preparing and presenting themselves as much as possible to a future employer.

Key words: travel agency, educational institutions, knowledge, skills, recommendation

INTRODUCTION

Management of the tourism product development requires the coordinated action of all stakeholders in the destination. Among the numerous stakeholders from the private sector, government and civil society, travel agencies play a particularly important role as

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intermediaries in the tourism market. The role of travel intermediaries is to distribute the product to the end customer. Travel intermediaries may be divided into wholesalers and retailers (Lubbe, 2000). The tour wholesaler, also known as tour operator, buys different components of the tourism product, like accommodation, transportation and activities from suppliers to create packages that are retailed via the travel agent to the consumer (Gjurković and Matošević Radić, 2020). The travel agencies, also called retailers, have been over the years, one of the main ways in which the travel industry trades with customers (Byrnes et al., 2013).

Therefore, the role of the travel agency as an intermediary requires a high degree of communication and cooperation between the end consumer and the supplier, implying that information must be carried out in accordance to what suppliers must order, what customers want to buy, and the economic conditions and transactions involved (Gustafson, 2012). Although in previous years the general opinion was that travel agencies were acting in the interests of the suppliers, because they received significant commissions from them, today travel agencies receive most of their income from their customers, so their role is mainly directed towards the interests of their customers more than to suppliers (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2016).

Due to changes in the tourist market, such as the deregulation of air transport and the increasingly intensive use of information and communication technology in business and life and changes in behavior of tourism consumers, tourist agencies were forced to change their business model providing ways of adding value to tourists. In order to create added value for tourists, they started designing complex tourist products, intended for narrow market niches. Since the creation of such products requires knowledge of the requests and needs of narrow market niches, they began to expect their employees to have specific knowledge and skills adapted to new market conditions.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TO THE BUSINESS OF TRAVEL AGENCIES

The quality of a complex tourist product directly depends on the individuals who come into direct contact with tourists in the preparation and realization of the product, so an educated workforce is a key quality factor in tourism (Bartoluci and Budimski, 2010). For the development of complex tourist products, it is necessary to provide various and diverse profiles of employees, with different kinds of education, knowledge and skills that should be adequately educated in an appropriate educational system.

The study programmes of educational institutions in the field of tourism often focus more on specific knowledge and skills in the hotel industry, at the same time neglecting the business of travel agencies. Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to revise the entire study programmes in order to determine whether the lack of applied courses in the field of travel agency business can be compensated by the knowledge and skills that students acquire in generic business courses.

On the other side, as Vizjak (2015) points out, the education system as well as the methods of modern education are mostly an expression of the needs of the present, and are too little future-oriented. This is not only a consequence of the inertness of the study programmes and the bureaucratized teaching staff, but also of the lack of recognition of the future needs of the profession.

The success of acquiring knowledge and skills in the formal education system affects the employability of students on the labor market. Therefore, the cooperation between business entities and educational institutions in the development of educational programs is increasingly being emphasized to reduce the gap between what future employers expect and what educational institutions offer (Kostić-Bobanović, Moira, 2013; Jain et al., 2003). Gummesson (2002) considers it important for educational institutions to improve their links with industry, community and government as a symbiotic relationship will later emerge that could serve all stakeholders indefinitely.

For this purpose, this paper aims to investigate the gap in the perception of the necessary knowledge and skills of students (as future employees) and travel agencies in order to consider whether the previous cooperation with travel agencies has resulted in the recognition of their needs for knowledge and skills of future employees and whether these needs are adequately incorporated into the teaching process at the Department of Professional Studies at the University of Split.

METHODOLOGY

In order to examine whether there is a gap of opinions of students (which essentially represent future employees) and travel agencies on the knowledge and skills necessary for working in travel agencies, research was conducted on key groups of respondents. The research used the method of survey.

The first group of respondents consisted of final-year students of the University Department of Professional Studies, University of Split, who gained required knowledge in the field of travel agency business during their studies. Explicitly, at the University

Department for Professional Studies of the University of Split, the course Travel Agencies is offered at the undergraduate level, and Destination Management Companies course at the graduate level. However, it is important to emphasize that students also absorb other needed knowledge and develop skills for working in travel agencies within the framework of other courses in Trade and Tourism Management studies.

From the general characteristics of the first sample, it can be noted that 18% of respondents were male and 82 respondents were female. Regarding work experience, 79% of respondents in the first sample have some previous work experience, while the residual 21% have no work experience.

The second group of respondents consisted of travel agencies based in the Republic of Croatia, which deal with different areas of agency business.

Of the total number of travel agencies that participated in the research, 62% employ less than 10 employees, 14% have from 10 to 25 employees, and 24% employ more than 25 employees. Among the surveyed travel agencies, 19% have been working for less than 5 years, 23% have been existing on the market for between 5 and 10 years, 29% have been operating for between 10 and 20 years, while the remaining 29% have been developing their business for more than 20 years. Also, 76% of surveyed travel agencies operate throughout the year, while 24% operate seasonally.

Since both groups of respondents are represented by individuals and business entities with different general characteristics, and they have in common that they work in the field of tourist mediation or are formally educated for business in travel agencies, we believe that their opinion can be taken as relevant in investigating of differences in perception about the necessary knowledge and skills to work in travel agencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey questionnaire, which investigated the difference in the opinions of students and travel agencies on the necessary knowledge and skills to work in a travel agency, included three parts of questions. The first part of questions tried to collect students' opinions on the quality of the teaching process of their studies. The second group of questions focused on the staff selection process when hiring in travel agencies, trying to investigate what travel agencies expect from future employees and how they carry out the employee selection process. The third part of the question asked students and travel agencies about the necessary knowledge and skills to work in travel agencies, with the aim of identifying differences in their opinions.

Of the total number of students who participated in the survey, 69% said they wanted to work in a travel agency, and 31% said they did not. When asked to assess how well the study prepared them for work in a travel agency, almost 90% of them stated that during their studies they gained enough knowledge and skills to work in a travel agency. Also, a large proportion of surveyed students (as much as 73%) stated that during their studies they acquired enough knowledge and skills to start a travel agency business.

Asked to assess in which areas they acquired sufficient and in which insufficient knowledge and skills needed to work in travel agencies, more than half of the surveyed students believe that they have acquired sufficient knowledge and skills in almost all observed areas. In the area of agency business and designing new products, even more than 60% of the surveyed students accept as true that the study prepared them well for working in a travel agency. Furthermore, more than 50% of the surveyed students believe that during their studies they developed skills in the field of communication with clients and that they mastered foreign languages. On the other hand, students feel the least confident in the area of financial regulation and taxation (only 28% of students said they had acquired sufficient knowledge in this area).

Oppositely, areas in which, according to the surveyed students, they did not acquire enough knowledge and skills are: digital business (52% of respondents), management skills (48%), accounting and finance (33%), and sales and marketing (21% of surveyed students).

The above data are encouraging for consideration on the quality of the study program at the University Department of Professional Studies of the University of Split, because they show that students in all key areas feel confident that they are well prepared for work in a travel agency, although they clearly pointed out an additional effort to increase their knowledge in the area of digital business and to develop their management skills.

However, since the opinion of students (especially those without work experience in a travel agency) can be biased, it was necessary to compare it with the opinion of travel agencies.

For this purpose, Figure 1 shows comparative data on the key areas in which employees in travel agencies (as well as those who are looking for such a job) should have sufficient knowledge and skills. The results indicated that the opinions of both groups of respondents were agreed to the most important knowledge and skills for work: foreign languages, sales skills and digital business. Also, financial regulation and taxation was recognized by both groups of respondents as an area whose knowledge and skills are less necessary than others to work in a travel agency.

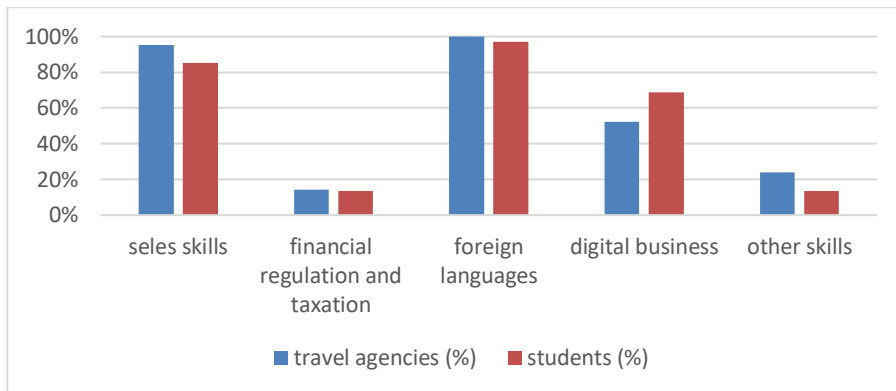


Fig. 1. Differences in the students’ and travel agencies’ opinion about the most important knowledge and skills for work in travel agencies

Although the above data show that students are well aware of the key areas in which they need to develop competencies for work in a travel agency, the fact that in the field of digital business students estimate that they have not received enough knowledge and skills is worrying, since this is one of the three key areas in the opinion of travel agencies.

Asked to indicate how they check the qualifications of candidates in the recruitment process, all travel agencies stated that they conduct a personal interview of a potential employee, but 62% of agencies make a decision only based on the submitted documentation, and 43% of agencies also conduct some form of candidate testing.

Figure 2 shows the differences in the opinions of students and travel agencies about additional characteristics that agencies take into account when deciding on the selection of new employees.

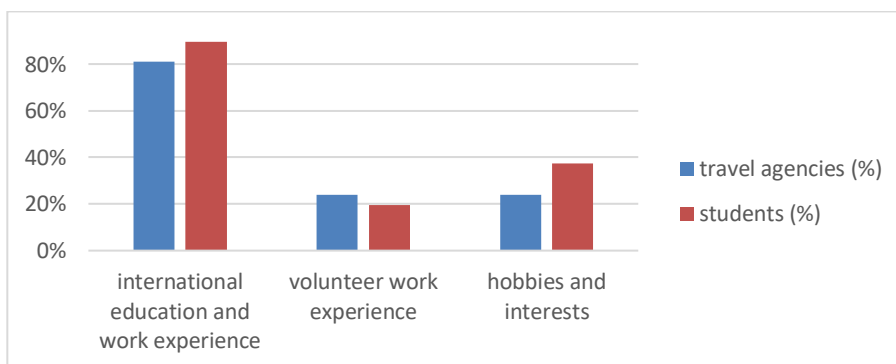


Fig. 2. Differences in the students’ and travel agencies’ opinion about the additional evaluation during employment in travel agencies

Although it can be concluded from the data shown in Figure 2 that the differences in the opinions of students and travel agencies about the additional characteristics that travel agencies consider when hiring are trivial, it should be noted that there is a higher proportion of students than travel agencies who value international work or educational experience as well as hobbies and other interests. On the other hand, volunteer work is underestimated by students compared to the opinion of travel agencies.

Figure 3 compares data on the opinions of students and travel agencies, obtained from their survey on the importance of recommendations when recruiting new staff.

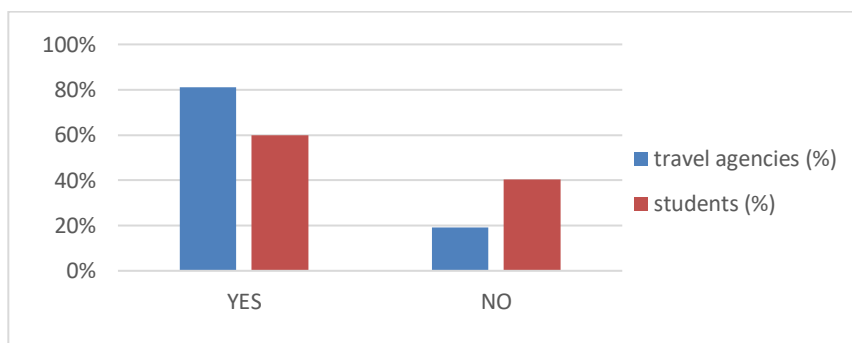


Fig. 3. Differences in the students’ and travel agencies’ opinion about the importance of recommendations when hiring in travel agencies

As can be seen from the data shown in the above Figure, more than 80% of travel agencies consider that recommendations are important in the process of staff selection, while a significantly smaller proportion of students (60%) share their opinion. In this context, it is somewhat worrying that even 40% of students do not even think to attach a recommendation when they compete for a job in a travel agency.

Differences in the students’ and travel agencies’ opinion about the importance of different kind of recommendations when hiring in travel agencies was shown in Figure 4.

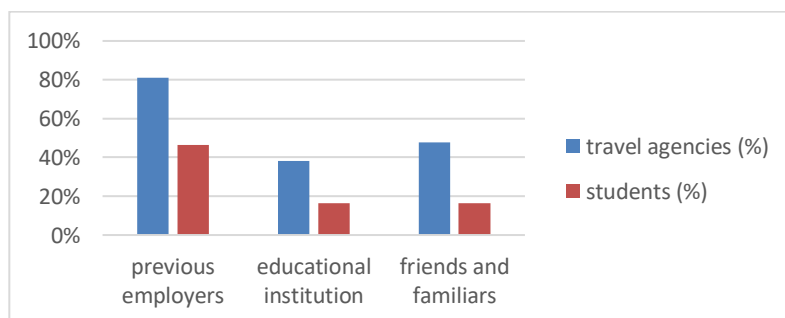


Fig. 4. Differences in the students’ and travel agencies’ opinion on the importance of different kinds of recommendations when hiring in travel agencies

Ranking the different types of recommendations submitted by candidates when applying for a job in a travel agency, travel agencies still consider recommendations from previous employers to be the most relevant, followed by recommendations from friends and relatives, and lastly the recommendations from educational institutions. On the other hand, in most cases, students will request and attach a recommendation from their previous employer, and they value the recommendations of friends and relatives and educational institutions equally.

From the above, it can be concluded that it is necessary to strengthen the cooperation of educational institutions and travel agencies in such a way that they are introduced to study programs and that they are involved in their improvement, in order to increase the trust of travel agencies in the recommendations of educational institutions. On the other hand, it is necessary to encourage students to ask more often for recommendations and attach them (especially from previous employers) because as many as 80% of travel agencies consider them valuable when selecting candidates in the hiring process.

CONCLUSION

Travel agencies, as important stakeholders in the tourism development in destination which create products with high value added, need to employ employees with specific knowledge and skills. However, education systems pay relatively less attention to them compared to the hotel industry. Therefore, the role of educational institutions is to recognize their needs for the knowledge and skills of their employees through cooperation with travel agencies and to incorporate them into study programmes through applied and generic business courses. In this context, this paper investigated whether the study program at the University Department of Professional Studies of the University of Split is adapted to the needs of travel agencies for the knowledge and skills of their employees.

The research showed that there was no significant gap in the opinion of students and travel agencies about the necessary knowledge and skills to work in travel agencies, which means that the study program is adequately adapted to the expectations and needs of travel agencies for the knowledge and skills of their employees. However, it is necessary to continue the cooperation of educational institutions with travel agencies in order to incorporate into the teaching process not only current needs for knowledge and skills, but also, as far as possible, to anticipate future needs, so that travel agencies can recruit employees who can respond to the challenges of their business in the future.

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